National Catholic News Service
Know Your Faith
Week : Mary for the Contemporary World

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When we think about Mary today often a phrase which has been repeated throughout the centuries springs up in our mind:

"Mother of God, Ever Virgin, Our Lady, Full of Grace, Morning Star..."

Even though each one of these phrases reveals a deep understanding of this woman who was the mother of Jesus, we also sometimes find the very same words appear to be empty of meaning just because they are so familiar.

How can we get back in touch with the original witness of Mary in order to break through the shell which habit and repitition can sometimes produce?

Perhaps one way would be to return to a study of the Scriptures in order to uncover some of the dynamics of faith as it was actually lived by Mary in her own time.

This 'existential ' approach to Mary may be able to reveal to us the special quality of her faith in a ~~new~~ way ~~which will be~~ relevant to us today.

It is important to remember that for Mary as for all of us, the future was hidden. Therefore, she had to struggle at times to keep her faith in God and in her own mission even when her understanding was kept in darkness.

After Mary said to the angel Gabriel 'Be it done according to thy will' her body responded to the impregnation of the Holy Spirit, and she began to manifest signs of the child she carried within.

Can we imagine the anxiety that Mary must have felt at different moments during her pregnancy while she waited in silence for the divine origin of her fertility to be recognized by her fianceé Joseph? For nearly seven months Mary waited knowing all that time that the punishment for infidelity in her culture was stoning to death.

With her reputation damaged and her life in danger Mary must have had to make a supreme act of the will to have faith in God when "Her husband Joseph, being a man of honor and wanting to spare her publicity, decided to divorce her informally." (Matt. 1:19)

After Joseph was told in a dream the real origin of his pregnancy he immediately took Mary as his wife. Having the companionship of a husband, however, did not protect Mary from other difficult situations in which her faith must have been tested.

For those of us in the contemporary world who fear, especially during a first pregnancy, being unable to reach a hospital at the moment of birth, it is easy to grasp the existential dread that must have been present to Mary and Joseph in their not being able to find room in the inn in Bethlehem.

Then after the child was born, Mary and Joseph shared in the agony of anyone who has been forced to become a refugee when they fled to Egypt.

Mary's faith grew in the midst of real struggles, dread, and danger. Her son was a child of promise, but the fulfillment of this promise had only been revealed in special moments to Elizabeth, the Magi, Simeon and Anna. The rest of the time Mary had to believe in a future hope.

Rather than finding the existential dynamic of faith weaken for Mary as her life progressed, the Bible reveals a greater and greater intensification.

If we think about the pain we might feel if an innocent child had been intentionally killed by someone wanting to murder our own son or daughter, we can begin to grasp the pain that Mary must have experienced when she heard that Herod "had all the male children killed who were two years old or under." (Matt .2:16).

Then, at a later date Mary feared for the life of her own son when Jesus was lost to his parents for three days and three nights. We know today through modern media what a shock passes through an entire society when a twelve year old child is missing.

"They were overcome when they saw him, and his mother said to him, " My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you." (Luke 2:48)

" Why were you looking for me?" he replied. " Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?" But they did not understand what he meant." (Luke 48-50)

We often forget because we have the hindsight of the Resurrection and Pentacost that the women and men who lived most closely to the moment of the incarnation did not have the same perspective on the life of Jesus.

Mary, along with Peter, John, and the other disciples had to live out their faith in the context of uncertainty and confusion. 'They did not understand what he meant.'

It is precisely this capacity to believe in the midst of the difficult existential situation that made these early followers of Christ so great. It is also this same dynamic that makes them so relevant to us today.

The culmination point of the experience of 'not understanding' had to be the passion and death of Christ. Mary experienced fully what Pope John Paul II has called "the Sign of Contradiction" when she saw her son, whom she had believed was destined to 'rule over the House of Jacob forever' humiliated, tortured, and killed.

Mary, who remained faithful in her vigil at the foot of the cross while so many others ran away is a model for us precisely because she was so active in the exercise of her faith in the darkness of human understanding. The 'sword which would pierce her own heart' was a sword which cut across her understanding and opened her whole being to faith.

Mary's witness is a witness of relationship to God the Father, God the Holy Spirit, and God the Son. This relationship was developed through the specific circumstances of her life.

Precisely because she was able time and again to believe in the face of existential situations of anxiety, danger, fear, sorrow, and lack of understanding Mary is truly able to be the co-redeemer of the world. By leading us through faith ever back to God, she is also the one who becomes for us ever new.